

THE ASPARAGUS

No one noticed the shiny chandelier and the asparagus that stuck there, a green smear on the lightbulb shaped like a flame. Gus had had enough, his brothers' and sisters' heads bitten off by the filthy rich. Boiled, peppered and chomped — that was what asparagus had to look forward to as they were herded and bundled with red rubber bands — ripped out of farms where they grew freely, where they enjoyed gossip, a good night's sleep, and family. Asparagus were packed in crates, more cramped than chickens, more humiliated than cows. Asparagus weren't dumb like sheep who also didn't get a differentiating plural in English. There was talk of what happened after a whole field or garden was stripped like a bombed-out town, and certainly Gus had one or two nightmares that hinted of the destruction that was to come. Spears indeed, he thought, as he saw the knife blade and fork prongs inching towards his throat. All his fiber had been steamed out of him, he could barely even poke someone in the eye and be effective. His next door neighbor lay dead beside him, drowned in buttery sauce. Gus's green blood grew hot at the injustice, the China plate cold under his back. His spine tightened in disgust of human lies and flattery: how delicious he was, how expensive. He watched, powerless, as his tender wife was pulverized into mush behind the capped white teeth of a hungry dinner guest. This is when he catapulted, a vegetable Olympian, and splattered against that crystal so close to the ceiling — the hearty eaters, like all oppressors, laughing and choking, too polite to even say they'd noticed.

SECRETARY

I never learned how to type because then I would have had something to fall back on and I learned early that if you have something to fall back on — whether it's a boyfriend or bank account or seventy words per minute — you do. So when I fell back it was into waitressing, unemployment checks, adjunct teaching, the occasional factory job. And that was good because never once did I have to wear pantyhose or buy lined cream-colored skirts that I would never have worn anywhere else but to work and those matching blazers would have somehow legitimized my job answering somebody else's phone and putting someone else's mail in the outgoing tray. If I was going to take dictation, I wanted the voice coming from my own mind. Not that I have anything against secretaries — some of my best relatives are them. It's just that early on I knew I wanted to be a writer. Of course, then I didn't know I'd turn out to be the kind no one would pay for. Which is good because then I might have listened to my mother, or the guidance

counselor. I have good-looking hands when I polish my nails. I've been told I have a pleasant voice. And, as it is, it always turns out that my bosses are men, so really what would have been the difference, being a secretary, except for all those expensive skirts telling me that I was part of a real profession, telling me it wouldn't be so easy to quit and move on. I'm glad that no one I knew back then even knew any poets who could tell me how bad writers could wind up having it How easily I could have eased into that swivel chair, reading Danielle Steele through my breaks, never forgetting to unplug the coffee pot at five. At least now when I cry I usually have some idea why.

— Denise Duhamel

Williamsport PA

1969

I remember the morning me and Dave woke up out in the desert north of Barstow California a month after we got home from Vietnam. We had gone camping and had taken mescaline and were drinking Thunderbird wine. The joshua tree we camped by was burned to the ground and smoldering and the bottoms of our shoes were melted from walking on the embers and we had shot holes all through my truck and beat the crap out of each other and were all bloodied up and laughing our asses off, but it wasn't the same as the war, and nothing since then has been either.

FACTORY LIFE

I'd been up most of the previous night drinking to forget the job and when I came in the next morning I had a ferocious hangover that included the runs and after making three trips to the john the foreman said one more and it was a white slip for wasting time so I just shit my pants and stood there over my machine in it for the rest of the day but the foreman stayed away from me, and this made the remainder of the shift tolerable if not downright pleasant.

MAKING THUMBS

Yesterday I watched a guy catch his right index finger between a part he was pulling on the broach machine and the steel backing plate on the machine and he didn't even wince as 800 pounds of hydraulic pressure crushed the